

Faith and Superstition

This old Native story, at its start anyway, is all about beauty, and its attraction, about a woman, an Arikara woman, or so the legend says, a young woman so beautiful she attracted breathless warriors from all around, each of them bargaining with gifts—fine horses and other beautiful presents, whatever they could give—in return for this young woman’s hand.

Sounds like Shakespeare, doesn’t it?—a comely young maiden with too many suitors, all of whom will do absolutely anything to cut a deal she rejects, time after time after time.

But this yarn, this legend, is not Elizabethan. It has roots not all that far from here, a tale passed along through generations of the Arikara people, who once ranged this far south but generally lived—and still do—a good deal farther north along the Missouri River. Don’t imagine a field full of tipis, because the Arikara built big round earth lodges to protect themselves from grizzly Siouland winters.

But the story has to be set here on the Missouri River, I swear. Anyone who’s in love with Old Muddy’s massive shoulders will see what I mean. Listen.

‘Twas unfortunate, but one of those earnest suitors took liberties. . .you know. By way of improper advances—so says the legend—he succeeded in seducing her. *How* isn’t an important chapter of the legend. Whatever happened wasn’t as crucial to the saga as the fact that, sad as it seems, the princess thereby lost something of her charm, had it stolen away by what her people considered her disgrace.

You can read the legend for yourself in a memoir by an early missionary in eastern Nebraska, a man named the Reverend Samuel Allis, who spent forty years, a lifetime, among the Pawnees.

Rev. Allis says this young woman, unnamed, did what he calls “an act of mourning” to free herself from her disgrace. Whatever it was she did was insufficient, it seems, because she continued to feel rejection and, thus, walked away from the circle of earth homes where her people lived, walked out to a bluff to be alone, accompanied, people say, only by a little dog. Just the two.

Day after day, week after week, the people of the village would watch in silence as the two left early to sit out on a hill above the river.

And we now have come to the mystery. If we knew exactly where these events happened—if they did; if we knew who exactly told the story and where their earth homes found a place beneath the sky, we might still be able to find that same towering bluff because the people claim that after all of those silent trips that beautiful and disgraced woman took, alone, to the top of the hill, she and that little dog beside her were, by some miracle, turned to stone, the two of them alone, above the river. See ‘em?

If we knew where exactly, I swear I’d go—wouldn’t you?

Not so the missionary. “I leave the reader,” Rev. Allis wrote, “to believe this or not.” And then he says, “I do not, but relate the Indians story as it was told me.” And then, “Such are their superstitions, which they are full of, but useless to relate.”

Useless. How could he be so blind. What’s not to believe?

Just a paragraph or two into the famous Charles Eastman’s *The Soul of an Indian*, Eastman, a Dakota from not far away, writes this: “The religion of the Indian is the last thing about him the man of another race will ever understand.”

But then, I'm sure you don't have be Arikara to have your faith misunderstood. There are times I don't understand my own or certainly those who practice it.

Meanwhile, promise me you'll keep an eye out on those wonderful hills above the Missouri. And if you see her—and that little dog—call me. Anytime.